Why the Past Can Never Be a Good Guide to the Future

In response to the Philosophy Question:

"To what extent, and in what ways, can the past be

a good guide to the future?"

In this essay, I challenge the doxa that the past can be a good guide[1] to the future and engage the arguments that I most anticipate in opposition to my controversial stance, concluding that the past, almost always as an *anamnesic episteme*[2], is a deplorable guide, leading to predominantly negative outcomes in the future.

At first glance, my position seems obviously faulty. By challenging the notion that the past can *ever* be a good guide, one may argue that I am forced to concede that, since any choice presupposes some past knowledge or experience, all chosen actions cannot lead to good[3]. However, I base my

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[1] Here, a good guide refers to a source of information or experience that makes generally true predictions and consequently offers sound recommendations for future choices that lead to consistently positive outcomes. This interpretation will be defended later in the essay.

[2] 'Anamnesic Episteme' is a neologism used here to denote the modified form of k, one is cognizant of after k being recalled in the present from memory, and help acknowledge that our understanding of the past is subject to the constraints of interpretation in the present, and is molded by the very act of recall or perception thereof (see Kensinger, 2009; Barzykowski *et al.*, 2019).

[3] This creates a problem as it implies chosen actions, intuitively seen as leading to obviously positive outcomes (e.g. saving a drowning kid), are consequentially equivalent to actions appearing intuitively neutral, since there are no positive outcomes. Such a stance undermines the foundations of several philosophical disciplines, making the position highly untenable.

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argument not on the possibility of past knowledge leading to positive outcomes, but instead, on the past's capacity to positively guide the future. The simplest form of my argument is such:

P1: All choices made in a world of decisions[4] are informed by some past
  knowledge or experience.

P2: If the past is a reliable guide, choices informed by it must consistently
  yield positive outcomes in that world.

P3: However, choices do not consistently yield positive outcomes in any world.
  C_i: Therefore, the past is not a reliable guide in any world.

P4: A good guide must be reliable.
  C_f: Therefore, the past is never a good guide.

Before I vindicate these premises against counterarguments, I must initially ground them within a framework of my own, one I shall establish in metaphysics.

I. Beliefs and Desires

You, the reader, interact with the world through your evaluations of it or attitudes to it[5]. A belief is a type of attitude, dominantly conceived through a

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[4] A world of decisions (WoD) is an invoked conceptual environment in which several choice-inducing intents are uniquely purposed to achieve a similarly desired outcome. For instance, in the WoD of democratic politics, citizens intend to achieve the outcome of a society that would fulfill their needs and desires. Therefore, every citizen choses to vote for the politician whose policy positions or governance they feel would most aid in achieving this outcome.

[5] An attitude, psycologically, is best understood as an evaluation state of compounded perceptions of *attitude objects*, built from affective, conative, and cognitive components (see Maio *et al.*, 2018). Propositional attitudes, as used here, refer specifically to internal, causal, epistemically-induced states of evaluation held by an agent b towards a proposition p, that may be generally formulated as: "b v's that p" (where v is a propositional attitude verb) (see Rigo-Lemini & Martínez-Navarro, 2017), though such may not always be the case (e.g., King, 2002; Forbes, 2006, p.142-150).

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representational approach that understands believing in a proposition p to mean possessing a mental state that represents the content of p being held as true[6]. Desires (another attitude type) may be seen as closely related to beliefs in many different ways. I shall focus on one aspect here:

> For b to desire p, they must believe p (or something like it) to be good[i].

This statement appears instantly amicable to the proponents of good-based theories of desire[7], but may also work with two other popular theories of desire (as I will explain). In fact, I intend to posit not a case for what a desire is, but what is necessary to have it - a belief.

Perhaps the easiest theories to reconcile with my statement are pleasure-based theories (e.g., Vadas, 1984; Strawson, 1994). Proponents advocate that if b desires p, it is because b is disposed to p realizing pleasure and not-p realizing displeasure. I ask then, what does it mean to realize pleasure? Presumably, it is implied here that b acquires a state s_p that feels *good,* likely based on a dispositional belief about states like s_p being good. Therefore, if

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[6] Representationalists concur that the propositional content represented in their mental states is the same as the belief itself, but may disagree on the nature of a belief or conditions required to characterize it. LOTH posits that thoughts are processed in a fictional language - Mentalese, near syntactically, wherein belief in proposition x entails a representation in their mind performing an x-like role in their cognition (see Fodor, 1975; Fodor & Pylyshyn, 1988). Another view considers tracking of the world's features to be the primary evolutionary function of representational structures. Thus b must possess subsystem b_x that can enter state s_x only if x is held (see Dretske, 1998; Millikan, 2017). Detailed discussions of diverging views on beliefs (among representationalists or otherwise) are beyond the scope of this essay, yet a basic comprehension is necessary to grasp the nature of this argument.

[7] Good-based theorists of desire hold that to desire p **is** to believe p is good (e.g., Price, 1989; Bryne & Hajek, 1997). It's worth noting that my position evades the criticisms of Lewis (1988; 1996) toward good-based theories of desire using a highly technical decision theory based framework. I do not propose that b is motivated to make true a proposition p to an extent that p is believed to be good, but that b must possess the apparent belief that p is good if b desires p. No such predictive claim, that would be required for the framework to be applicable, is implied here or further in the case of WoDs[iii].

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state s_p is necessarily engendered by p, it seems logical to assert that b dispositionally holds the belief that something like p is conducive to good, and therefore, good, even if b has never perceived or even fully conceived p[8].

Similarly, my statement also appears consistent with Scanlon (1998)'s attention-based theory of desire that sees b desiring p as contingent on b's attention being directed to reasons favoring p, implying that he sees b as disposed to considerations counting in favor of p. Unlike pleasure based theories, Scanlon's work necessitates b cognitively evaluating the reasons supporting p. If reasons in favor of p: $[\, r_p = r_1 + r_2 + r_3 + \ldots + r_n \,]$ suffice to consistently attract b's attention toward p, it may be stated that considerations encompassed by r_p hold weight substantive enough for p to attract b's attention, which one may infer to mean that b believes something like p to merit attention due to r_p, and is thus broadly, good[9]. I do not find it

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[8] Take the case of Samantha, who desires to pass a test. According to pleasure-based theories, this desire is linked to the pleasure that she is disposed to realize were she to pass the test, for example, the sense of accomplishment. Samantha has never percieved or fully concieved the specifics of what it would be like if she did pass the test; it is the dispositional belief ingrained in her that associates something like what she thinks she would feel when she passes the test, to something that is good, and hence, she dispositionally believes that passing the test is intrinsically good.

[9] Should one agree with my perspective on some cases, yet argue that there may still be desires that are not contingent on belief of goodness, they must come up with a compelling alternative foundation that works to explain the evaulation of reasons in all other cases without relying on any such belief. One must also be careful not to confuse desires with needs; one's needs, as I see them, are not restricted to that which they must fulfill to continue living, but that which evolutionarily plays an exigent role in the welfare they are deterministically disposed to protect. I must ask, what exactly is it that determines that it is r_p that it takes for b's decision to be drawn toward p, if not a dispositional belief that anything like p with r_p reasons in favor of it is attention-worthy and hence, good? I do not think other existing theories of desire, even non-evaluative action-based theories or learning-based theories have, to my knowlegde, satisfactorily grappled with what exactly delineates the limits to that which they consider to evoke desires, but belief.

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conceivable to say that one genuinely possesses a desire, say, to pursue a musical career for r_p reasons, if they do not believe pursuing music is good for those reasons.

Having thus conveyed why I hold that a belief in p's goodness is necessary to desire p, I now endeavour to posit what is likely the very nucleus of my argument - a **Behavioral Viscosity Model** (BVM).

II. Metaphysical Choice in WoDs

Few concepts can claim to elicit as much controversy across the domains of philosophy, sociology, and psychology as those surrounding **action** and **decision** (see Alvarez & Hyman, 2019; Bruch & Feinberg, 2017; Lerner *et al.*, 2015)[10]. An intended action is generally considered to be an event, with most philosophers subscribing to one of two broad schools of thought:

1. **Causalism**, pioneered by Davidson (2001) (his "standard theory of action"), that *explains* intentional actions in terms of mental states concomitant to b's behavior[11] and

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[10] It is for this reason that I find it simply not feasible to contribute to the current philosophical discourse surrounding the topic in any significant capacity. Hence, what I shall do here should not be understood as new hypothesis, but seen simply as an extremely particular sort of philosophical examination of a *metaphysical landscape of choice*, that I so term, in a purely representative form, such that I may develop a consistent framework to evaluate the reliability of anamnesic episteme to inform decisions in a manner that leads to consistently good outcomes.

[11] Some causalists, like Setiya (2011) claims that when b φs intentionally, they desire to do so, and this desire guides how they φ. Most philosophers hold that that action requires mental states more than just belief and desire (see Bratman, 1987). Davidson, for instance, sees a true action statement in the form "b φ-*ed*", involving a belief-desire pair or reason (as a primary cause) and *intention* as mental states. The latter shall be discussed later on.

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2. **Non-Causalism**, championed by Anscombe (2005) and von Wright (1997), disputes the claim that mental states directly cause behavior, focusing instead on intentional and teleological explanations of action[12].

Consider the following syllogism:

P1: If φ, then x.

P2: I should x or want x.

$\quad$ Belief-Desire Pair

C: Therefore, I shall φ.

Here, C may be read as an intention (e.g., I intend to φ). It seems to be a popular view that an intention is not like a belief or a desire, that intentions are *sui generis* (or at the very least, irreducible). I disagree and *intend* to defend the strong cognitivist position that intentions are nothing but beliefs governed by practical and epistemic norms.

I ask what does the intention I just expressed entail? A non-cognitivist may hold that the intention is my *plan* (a committed conative state with no cognitive component) to defend my cognitivist stance (e.g., Bratman, 2009). My position is that when I considered whether or not to write this essay, the answer I reached after deliberating - my *decision*, **is** the belief I hold about what I will do, and that my intention (to defend a cognitivitist stance) is simply this belief. Any belief in p must involve b holding p's content as true

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[12] Though both Von Wright and Anscombe are non-causalists, their philosophies also bear significant differences. Anscombe posits that for b to φ intentionally, b must know what they are φing. While this condition may seem uncontroversial, it has received much criticism and defense (e.g., Bratman, 1987; Beddor & Pavese, 2021). She also believes intentions involve forseeing and planning, and cannot be reduced to mere causal antecedents. Von Wright argues intentional actions are goal-directed, focusing on the purpose b intends to realize by φing. He also introduces a concept of volitions or acts of will such that φ ($\mathbf{v} \supset p$) (where $\mathbf{v}$ symbolizes volition).

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(see Sankey, 2019a)[13] - this requires a commitment to holding p as true, for instance, here, the commitment (one to make defending a strong cognitivist position true) in belief aligns perfectly with intent, albeit not demonstrating considerable sensitivity to evidential considerations[14].

My view also seems to better explain the expression of intents as assertions. Take the statement: "I believe that my cognitivist stance is tenable". This statement appears to hold much less conviction than the statement, "My cognitivist stance is tenable". The latter assertion by me does not imply that I do not believe (in the cognitive stance I hold), instead that I believe with full conviction. That the most *complete* beliefs are expressed assertively, like intentions, makes a strong case for intentions being beliefs.

The realization of my decision, then, involves me choosing. To choose is to *act with intention* to pursue one possibility over other possibilities (and is thus, also a commitment). I suggest that decision-making takes place in a unique space where several choice-inducing intents form discrete packets of decision units, such that i intents (beliefs about future will, as I have shown) will lead to c_i choices only in a world of decisions (an aggregation of different decision units, forming a cohesive strata of choices collectively bearing the

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[13] This should not be taken to imply that belief in p means belief that 'p is true'. For a good clarification, see Sankey (2019b).

[14] This does not appear to concern me, since, under wonted circumstances, b deliberating on whether or not to engage in φ involves them assessing the worthiness of φing, not weighing evidence for or against the judgement that they will φ. If I am deliberating on whether or not to make coffee, it seems I am more interested in considering if the sensory experience that I think I shall obtain from drinking coffee is worth spending the effort that it takes to make the coffee over weighing the evidence on how likely I am to make and then drink the coffee. One must note that the belief that b will φ is grounded by reasoning that shows φ-ing to be worthwile, not that believing/intending φ is worthwile.

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desire to make true the outcome σ). Each WoD constitutes a layer of sorts, wherein although decision units may overlap (similar choices may exist in different layers), the teleological properties of a choice remain constant only inside this layer. Most importantly, these layers seem to demonstrate a mechanical property of fluids.

III.   Viscosity Shatters Trust

Let W_i represent the metaphysical world of decision i and I_{ij} represent the intensity of intent in W_i leading to choice j to guide b, who possesses K_{ij} anamnesic episteme. Thus, choice may be represented as: $C_{ij} = f(I_{ij}, K_{ij})$ in a given WoD.

Now, the reader may imagine the world to be a beaker, with rational choice-inducing and non-rational elements (water and air). The rational choice inducing elements are composed of several layers of WoDs, almost like a representative layer of water molecules (choices). Choices traverse between these layers of WoDs when meaningful decisions are made true, such that they impact various events that b may perceive, thereby changing the beliefs (intents) that b has about future will, and behaviors derived from those beliefs (see Albarracín & Wyer, 2000), altering the structure of decision units and thereby WoDs. This movement faces a resistive force when moving through the metaphysical domain (X) that I term **viscosity**, expressed in terms of n_{ij} or the **viscosity coefficient**.

The relationship between viscosity and choices, may be hence expressed:

$$\frac{dc_{ij}}{dt} = -n_{ij} \times \frac{\partial x}{\partial c_{ij}}$$

Simply put, the rate of change of choices in a given WoD is inversely

proportional to the viscosity constant and the gradient of the metaphysical layer the choice occurs in[15]. This is exemplified by the fact that choices face greater obstacles or seem harder to justify when they are transitioned to different layers of decisional units (as in high viscosity) while the reverse is true for lower viscosity where choices seem to face much less resistance when they are in the same or similar WoDs.

If the reliability of the past to guide the future is with respect to choice, then we run into a problem here. Choice, if you remember, involves only an intended action, which means it is composed of a belief, a desire, and an intention - the latter, as I showed from my strong cognitivist defense is simply a belief. For the past to be considered reliable to guide choices to positive outcomes, it must cross a certain threshold of reliability $R_{ij} > R_{xthreshold.}$ It is apparent that the reliability of anamnesic episteme is then impeded by the resistance from our viscosity as the transcendent choice from our past is translated into our present and thus, for the past to be able to guide the present in any world, anamnesia itself would have to be a reliable source of knowledge that the past holds, if one is to take that what is learnt by one from the past is consistently useful. This appears an absurd position to take, given the countless neurological and psychological evidence suggesting that recall is highly unreliable (Shaw & Porter, 2015; Kensinger, 2009; Brainerd & Reyna, 2005; Drivdahl & Hyman, 2013).

There are many possible criticisms of my position; one may deny the cognitivist stance and find fault with the idea that actions can simply be explained with beliefs and desires, especially since I have not allotted

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[15] I am well aware of the lofty appearance of the metaphysical claims being made in this section, and that I do not have the word count to elaborate or defend my position in sufficiently substantial nature. The reader should carefully interpret implicit notes from the text, inasmuch as they appear consistent with the overall nature of my work.

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significant portions of my work to debating non-cognitivism, or some may not be representationalists, and see beliefs as describing something completely different to intention that my stance does not seem to reflect. Some may be action-based theorists of desire or learning based theorists of desire and remain unimpressed with my view on desires. Yet, I think I have put up what appears to be a fairly sturdy view of the metaphysical choice-associated problems with so-called guidance by an entity called the past.

One may agree that the past is not a reliable guide, but still say that in a case that a good action occurs, the past has been a good guide for that action. Such a stance appears to me, quite hard to swallow. . To apply an adjective the likes of good to any person, is to grant it a characteristic in some forms, toward regularity. If there is no such world wherein the past consistently guides to positive outcomes, I must then hold that the past is never a good guide to the future.

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